



# DrugFree@WorkPlace

## Workplace Stress and Drug Use

According to the *American Institute of Stress*, 40% of employees say their jobs are very—or extremely—stressful.

Workplace stress coupled with the stress of everyday life leads some people to try to deal with the pressure by self-medicating with drugs or alcohol. But this is a mistake that can result in substance abuse issues and addiction. Needing to have a drink, smoke a joint, or take a pill just to get through the day can be a potentially dangerous situation.

When work-related stress is consistently part of an employee's day and that person turns to drugs or alcohol to cope, other areas of his or her life will begin to suffer. Employees who use drugs to relieve stress not only compromise their own health and safety; they jeopardize the safety of their coworkers and the workplace.

## Stress and Substance Abuse Problems

Stress has a negative impact physically, mentally, and emotionally, and drug and alcohol use only makes matters worse.

Here are some negative effects of workplace stress combined with substance abuse:

Stress results in a lack of motivation, lower productivity, an inability to focus, and more absenteeism. When a person feels stressed, he or she misses more days of work. Drug and alcohol use increase absenteeism even more and could eventually result in loss of the job.

Stress can cause serious health problems like heart disease, high blood pressure, weight gain, migraine headaches, digestive issues, depression, anxiety, and more. Prolonged substance abuse results in adverse complications like lung and coronary disease, stroke, cancer, and mental health conditions.

Constant workplace stress can negatively affect one's sleep, which makes it more difficult to perform a job well. Sleep-deprived employees experience 23% reduced concentration and 18% reduced memory throughout the day. While people often start out drinking or drugging to help them fall asleep, several studies have reported sleep problems associated with the use of illicit drugs, and the vast majority of alcoholic patients entering treatment report insomnia-related symptoms, such as difficulty falling asleep and maintaining sleep.

Ongoing, constant stress can lead to burnout. Burned-out individuals often become socially withdrawn and disengaged from their work in the same way that addicts tend to isolate themselves. Isolation is extremely common in active addiction. As the disease of addiction progresses, addicts begin to have a very hard time interacting with other people, which leads to more isolation and loneliness. Loneliness increases stress levels, and addiction leads to even more loneliness and isolation. When a person becomes addicted to drugs or alcohol, the substance demands all of his or her attention—activities that once were enjoyed with friends and family are replaced with the substance of choice. This creates a downward cycle that too often ends in depression and suicide.

When stress from work and life gets to be too intense, chronic, and unmanaged, it takes a toll on a person's health and well-being. Using drugs and/or alcohol to relieve stress always exacerbates the problem. The substances people rely on to help them relax, sleep, or recharge turn against them, destroying their physical, mental, and emotional health.

### **Managing Stress**

Managing stress at work is important to a person's health and a healthy workplace. There are effective stress relievers that have been proven to work, and they can be used in a variety of situations without having to turn to alcohol or drugs for relief.

Here are some ways that might help to manage and mitigate stress at work:

Try to identify the things that make you feel stressed by tracking how you spend your time. Write down the things you do and how you feel during each part of the day—morning, afternoon, and evening. After about a week you should start to notice that your stress spikes when you are doing certain activities or are around certain people. You can then work to limit your exposure to those stress triggers.

Realize that it is not always possible to accomplish every item on your to-do list. Prioritizing goals and focusing on the things that matter most will help you to be more efficient. Make a list of the things that must get done

each day, and work on the most important tasks when your energy level is at its highest. Delegate the less important work to others whenever possible.

Having a close friend or a group of friends you can talk to and spend time with is very important. People need to have an outlet for frustrations. But even if you are not into "venting," positive social interaction with other people can help reduce stress levels. Every hour spent with friends and loved ones can help increase the chances of having a better day. But this does not mean meeting coworkers for happy hour to complain about a hard day at work! Even casual substance abuse can devolve into chemical dependency and addiction.

Be careful about leaving workplace stress at the end of the day and immediately jumping into stressful situations at home. Stress is cumulative, and when you leave work, you need time to relax and decompress before tackling personal problems. Going from one kind of stress to another does not give the mind and body a chance to recover. Try to take at least a few minutes for yourself to unwind at the end of the workday before taking on family problems at home. Just putting your phone away for 10 to 15 minutes of meditation after work can make a big difference.

If stress is challenging your ability to cope, and self-care measures just aren't relieving your stress, you may need to look for help in the form of professional therapy or counseling.